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ABSTRACT

Recent research has investigated the impact of neighborhood violence on children's mental health and moral development. Based on the view that the way in which children construe their experiences of violence mediates the impact of unsafe neighborhoods and that children's narrative is important for children's construction of self and incorporation of their culture's world view, this study examined how elementary school children construe their experiences of violence as represented in their stories. Participating were all the children in grades 3, 4, and 5 in a central city school in Memphis, Tennessee, a city ranked third in the nation for violent crime. Classroom teachers asked children to "write a story about something that happened to you." Analysis indicated that children wrote stories averaging 113 words, with grade-related increases in words per sentence. Fifty-eight (17 percent) of the 345 stories described violent episodes and 28 described nonviolent interpersonal conflict. Using Bruner's theory of the role of narrative in acculturation, a qualitative analysis revealed how children used stories to construct a sense of self in a moral order. Findings suggested that children who experience adult violence are unable to find motives that explain the behavior of the antagonists and are not able to use the narrative form to identify such violence as nonnormative and undesirable. (Author/KB)

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"This is about a fight": Stories of Violence by Central City School Children

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"This is about a fight":

Stories of Violence by Central City School Children

There is good reason for concern about children growing up in high crime neighborhoods. Recent work has investigated the impact of neighborhood violence on children's mental health and moral development (e.g., Trickett & Schellenbach, 1998). We believe that a critical variable mediating the impact of unsafe neighborhoods on development is how children construe their experiences of violence. Our work is based on theory concerning the importance of narrative for children's construction of self and incorporation of their culture's worldview (Bruner, 1990; Nicolopoulou, 1996). The work reported here is a descriptive study that includes a qualitative analysis of stories written by children attending a central city school in a city ranked 3rd in violent crime by the FBI Uniform Crime Report.

All third, fourth, and fifth graders were asked by their classroom teachers to "write a story about something that happened to you." Children wrote stories averaging 113 words on a variety of topics, with grade-related increases in words per sentence. Several linguistic and thematic variables were coded, including topic, self- and other descriptors in terms of traits, emotions, physical attributes, etc. Inter-rater reliabilities over 95% were established for 33 variables describing the stories. Grade effects on these variables will be reported.

Fifty-eight (17%) of the 345 stories described violent episodes, 22 concerning violence between peers or siblings, 8 involving punishment (wapping, knocking on the head, whipping, etc.), and 13 involving other adult violence (7 against children, and 6 against other adults). Eight stories were about criminal violence (murder, assault, abduction), and 6 involved guns (not including toy guns). These 58 stories were compared to the 28 stories that described non-violent interpersonal conflict.

A qualitative analysis, grounded in Bruner's (1990) theory of the role of narrative in acculturation, We consider how children use stories to construct a sense of self in a moral order. We see clear examples of this in stories of peer violence. However, we suggest that children who experience adult violence are unable to find motives that explain the behavior of the antagonists and are not able to use the narrative form to identify such violence as non-normative and undesirable.

We discuss our data in light of theory concerning the narrative construction of self and the developing moral voice.

"This is about a fight":
Stories of Violence by Central City School Children

There is good reason for concern about children growing up in high crime neighborhoods. Recent work has documented how neighborhood violence has troubling consequences for children's mental health and for their cognitive, social, and moral development (e.g., Apfel & Simon 1996, Garbarino 1992, Osofsky 1997, Trickett & Schellenbach 1998). We believe that a critical variable mediating the impact of unsafe neighborhoods on development is how children construe their experiences of violence.

Our work is based on theory concerning the importance of narrative for children's construction of self and for the incorporation of their culture's worldview (Bruner, 1990; Nicolopoulou, 1996). As children learn to take authorship of their own experiences, they place themselves as protagonists in morality tales. They learn to use narrative structure to frame unexpected and undesirable outcomes. Practice in telling the stories of their own experience entails practice in understanding character, motives, goal states, and conflict.

The work reported here is a descriptive study that includes a qualitative analysis of stories written by children attending a central city school in a city ranked 3rd in violent crime by the FBI Uniform Crime Report.

Method

Collecting and Transcribing Stories

Data were collected in a midtown school in Memphis, Tennessee. Over half the children live below the poverty level, and school-wide achievement in reading and math is just below the 50th percentile nationwide. Memphis ranks third in the nation for violent crime, according to the *FBI Uniform Crime Report*.

All third, fourth, and fifth graders were asked by their classroom teachers to "write a story about something that happened to you." Stories were written in class on lined legal sized paper.

Undergraduate psychology students transcribed the stories, preserving the children's spelling and punctuation. Stories were divided into sentences based on the child's punctuation, or, in the absence of that, on the transcriber's judgment of subject-predicate units. Each story was checked by two additional coders, and differences in segmenting decisions were resolved by the first author. Stories in the children's handwriting can be examined in the notebook below. Examples 1 through 6 present the stories as they were transcribed.

Classifying and Coding Stories

Types of Stories. Two coders reliably classified the narratives according to whether they involved **violence, non-violent conflict,** or **accidental injuries** (kappa = .83). Violence and non-violent conflict stories were further classified according to whether the antagonist was an adult or a child. Stories that involved violence by adults were subdivided into those that involved punishment violence and those involving criminal violence, and between those involving violence against a child or violence against another adult. Stories that reported violence by children were subdivided into those that concerned conflict between siblings or peers, those that reported fantasy violence, and those that reported possession of a gun. Figure 2 presents this classification of stories with the frequencies in each category.

Assessment of Linguistic Complexity. Words per sentence was used as a measure of linguistic complexity.

Narrative Construction of Self and Other. We used several indices to assess children's presentation of self and other in the stories. Tables 1 and 2 list the variables coded for each story, comparing violence stories to stories of non-violent interpersonal conflict. Two of the authors independently coded 10% of the stories with greater than 95 percent agreement on these variables. The last three variables in Table 2 are composite created by summing several other variables. The

'psychological vocabulary' variable was a sum of all emotion, motivation, and trait words. The 'relational self' variable sums plural first-person pronouns, kinship references, references to self in terms of roles or relationships (e.g., student or friend), references to self as a member of an elective group (e.g., "I'm a Green Dog.") or an ascribed category (e.g., age, gender, race). The 'individuated self' variable summed singular first-person pronouns, references to the author's own name, physical attributes, possessions, preferences, skills and achievements.

Results

Stories Children Wrote: Frequency of Conflict and Violence

Altogether 345 stories were collected. Figure 1 indicates how the stories broke down by topic. Fifty-eight (17%) of the 345 stories described violent episodes, 22 concerning violence between peers or siblings, 8 involving punishment (wapping, knocking on the head, whipping, etc.), and 13 involving other adult violence (7 against children, and 6 against other adults). Eight stories were about criminal violence (murder, assault, abduction), and 6 involved guns (not including toy guns). There were no significant grade-related differences in the types of stories written.

Complexity of Stories

The stories averaged 113 words. Over all the stories, complexity increased with grade, $F(2,297)= 4.27$, $p< .01$). For violence stories, however, there was a nearly-significant grade by antagonist interaction, $F(2,87)= 2.75$, $p<.07$. Although complexity increased with grade in peer- or sibling conflict stories, there was no grade-related increase when conflicts with adults were reported.

Narrative Construction of Self

We did not find significant differences, after adjusting for the number of significance tests performed, between violence stories and non-violent conflict or

accident stories on any of our thirty-two measures of the narrative construction of self. Nor were we able to establish statistical significance of differences between the different types of violence stories we identified.

Our comparisons between these stories has primarily been descriptive and qualitative, and is illustrated in the analyses of the example stories presented below.

Narrative and the Development of a Moral Voice

Bruner (1990) discussed several qualities of narrative that make stories crucial to the task of 'bringing children into culture.' We have found three of these critical in a qualitative analysis of the stories produced by the children in our sample.

Narratives make sense of the unexpected. People tell stories when something non-normative happens, and in the process of representing the unexpected events in narrative form, they find ways to make the them comprehensible. When we tell stories to children, we help them learn to distinquish culturally normative events from the extraordinary and non-cannonical. We help them discover what needs to be explained. They learn to identify conflict, and they learn what counts as a culturally acceptable explanation for conflicts of various type.

Narratives take a moral stance. The teller of a story takes a position vis-a-vis the cultural expectations that have been violated. All well-formed stories, even trivial ones, have a moral in the sense that the teller alligns himself or herself with certain cultural values. The story-teller identifies something non-normative that has transpires, and then indicates whether this is a good or bad thing, and whether there are justifiable reasons for the behaviors reported.

Narratives take an epistemological stance. Well-formed stories often turn on who knew what when, and good story-tellers have to be aware that what the listener knows is different from what the narrator knows AND may be different from what

various characters know at any given point in the story. Narratives turn on the issue of other minds. They coax us into seeing through others' eyes. It is in the cultural activity of story telling that we achieve and maintain the ability to 'get in one another's heads.'

Example 1: Peer Violence

Story 320 4th grade girl

1. One day in third grade I was slapped by a girl named Jessica Hinson.
2. It all started when we we're lining up
3. and I was first in line under the clock.
4. and she started slipping in front of me.
5. I told her to stop, but she didn't.
6. She said, "I', going to meet my friend Janeel."
7. Then we headed outside.
8. I waited on my friend P. J.
9. and then she came out.
10. We walked to the doors of the cafeteria.
11. Then we saw Jessica and her friend.
12. they called me all sorts of names such as, fat mamma, Ugly,
13. and she also does things called checks.
14. In some way this is self-defense out how to mouth a fight.
15. Smack!
16. I feld with tears.
17. I went to Mrs. Harveys room and explained what happened.
18. I contacted Mrs. Crass [?] and told her
19. and she said she was going to talk to Jessica.
20. Then my Aunt saw me.
21. I went to Evergreen as fast as I could.
22. I demanded to use their phone but they said, "no."
23. After a day of thinking, I went home

Interpretive Analysis: The Role of Peer Conflict in the Developing Moral Voice

Making sense of the unexpected. This story explains an act of violence as the culmination of a series of events ("It all started when..") The author reports a pattern of hostile behavior ("she does things called checks"). Although she does not present a resolution to the conflict, (the story appears to be incomplete) she reports efforts to seek help that indicate her expectations that the adults in her world will do

something to restore culturally normative interaction.

A moral stance. This is clearly a story about a moral wrong. The author tells of her own distress ("I feld with tears"), and she expresses a certain indignation ("I demanded to use their phone"). She attempts to provide a psychological explanation for a morally unacceptable behavior ("In some way this is self-defense out how to mouth a fight.") She construes the situation as calling to moral action, and she is a bit conflicted about what action to take. In the final line she reports a day of thinking about the situation, and presumably she would have told us what decision she had come to if she had not run out of time.

Awarenesss of other minds. This author is atuned to the epistemological states and the internal life of several characters. She speculates about psychological defense mechanisms used by her antagonist ("In some way this is self-defense"). She recognizes the need to "explain" what happened to the adults who were not present to see it (Mrs Howards and Mrs Crass). Most impressively, this author seems to have an awareness of potential cultural limitations of her readers. She recognizes that a couple of white college students might not know what 'checking' is.

Example 2: Adult Violence

Story 170 4th grade boy
1. This is about a fight.
2. It was new year night.
3. My dad and his borther got into a fight.
4. Went my next door.
5. They had guns.
6. they was going to killd him went the gun.
7. They hite him in the month.
8. Then my uncle girl fenrid call the police.
9. The police had came put my dad in the car.
10. Then they take him out went my gandmother came.
11. Then we want home.
12. The police left.
13. My gandmother left.
14. And the next door nader moving.
The End

Interpretive Analysis: The Impact of Adult Violence on the Developing Moral Voice

Making sense of the unexpected. This story reports what must have been a terrifying incident, but with no indication that the author recognizes the events as extraordinary. The child reports no emotional responses, and it is difficult to identify an affective tone in the story. Although this boy has succeeded in organizing the experience sequentially (a crucial property of narrative structure), he has not found a way to use narrative to make this event explainable in terms of cultrual norms.

A moral stance. In this story, the author has no moral voice. There are no evaluative words and no implied evaluation of any character or any action in the story. The author shows no evidence of having constructed a self that takes a position in a moral order.

Awarenesss of other minds. The author does not speculate about motives or about the thoughts or emotions of any characters in the story.

We speculate that such serious violence, perpetrated by significant adults in a child's life, may seriously impair a child's developing ability to author his or her own experiences. At the same time, we believe that opportunities to tell the story to a listener who can provide supports for the development of a moral and epistemological stance is exactly the intervention required for children whose lives include such experiences.

Discussion

Storytelling as Authoring the Self

It is in making our life stories that we take authorship of our own lives. When children are given guidance and opportunities to formulate their experiences in narrative, they take a certain authority over those experiences. Children have relatively little control over what happens to them. Many of the children attending

Memphis City school live in such chaotic circumstances that it seems as though *no one* is in control. When they tell the stories of what has happened to them, they take control of their own experience in a very that is critical to the development of self.

Storytelling as Moral Discourse

Great religious leaders and moral teachers in every tradition have understood that storytelling is an important way to teach moral values. We probably do more to instill our moral values in our children by the stories we tell sitting around the dinner table or (in Memphis) out on the front porch, than by all the preachings and scoldings we give them.

When we encourage children to *participate* in the story-telling, that is, to bring *their* stories to the table, we are bringing them into the moral discourse of our culture. When a child makes a story out of the fight she had with her big sister, or the spelling test he failed, or the home run she made in the kick-ball game, these stories require creating an interpretation of their experience in light of what the child understands about our cultural expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behavior and outcomes. When children choose which of their experiences bear relating to others and when they decide how to describe and explain them, they are developing a moral voice.

Children writing about Violence

When children were asked to write about anything that had happened to them, 24% of the children in this sample wrote stories about interpersonal conflict. About 70% of those stories involved at least one act of violence. Stories of violence included peer and sibling fights, adult punishment (e.g., whipping, wapping, slapping, etc.), adult criminal violence against children (e.g., kidnapping, physical abuse leading to hospital treatment), and adult violence against one another (e.g., spouse battering, neighborhood gun fights).

Many of the stories in our corpus contain heartbreaking examples of the difficulty in children's lives and many more raise serious concerns about our children's safety and well-being. Nevertheless, we found most children able to construct stories that place their experiences in the context of cultural norms that

represent violence and aberrant and undesirable. The exceptions to this were often found in stories of adult violence, and especially those of adult-adult violence. We believe that children exposed to this kind of violence need special help in putting such experiences in an interpretive context that will allow them to take authorship of these disturbing experiences.

What ELSE did children write about?

It is important not to lose sight of the fact a sizable majority of the 345 stories (84%) did not include any acts of violence. Most of the stories (73%) did not include any interpersonal conflict at all.

Children wrote touching stories of family support and of family fun. They wrote stories about accidental injuries and illnesses. They wrote about holidays and visits to relatives. They wrote about learning new skills and about school accomplishments. They wrote about friends moving away and about making new friends. Despite the frequent violence in their community and the constant threat of violence in their world, most of these children clearly have a wealth of family resources. It is important that we recognize that among those resources are the rich narrative traditions of their families and communities.

Table 1

Number of Stories Including Various Self and Other Constructs

Construction of Self and Other	Occurrence in Violence Stories		Occurrence in Non-violent Conflict Stories		Occurrence in All Stories	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
physical attributes of self	13	24.1	5	13.2	63	18.7
physical attributes of other	5	9.3	3	7.9	27	7.8
possessions of self	17	31.5	20	52.6	157	45.5
possessions of other	19	35.2	12	31.6	116	33.6
emotions or motives of self	32	59.3	24	63.2	202	58.5
emotions or motives of other	18	33.3	19	50.0	87	25.2
psychological traits of self	7	13.0	6	15.8	28	8.3
psychological traits of other	8	14.8	6	15.8	39	11.3
skills/abilities of self	3	5.6	2	5.3	40	11.9
skills/abilities of other	0	0.0	3	7.9	20	6.0
achievements of self	12	22.2	13	34.2	97	28.1
achievements of other	4	7.4	5	13.2	37	10.7
preferences of self	3	5.6	3	7.9	42	12.2
preferences of other	0	0.0	1	2.6	6	1.8
roles or relationships of self	0	0.0	2	5.3	12	3.5
roles or relationships of other	31	57.4	21	55.3	152	45.1
group membership of self	3	5.6	3	7.9	34	9.9
group membership of other	3	5.6	4	10.5	23	6.9
race or ethnicity of self	1	1.9	2	5.3	11	3.3
race or ethnicity of other	0	0.0	1	2.6	4	1.2
gender of self	3	5.6	2	5.3	20	5.9
gender of other	22	40.7	22	57.9	150	43.5
age of self	21	38.9	10	26.3	87	25.2
age of other	9	16.7	8	21.1	44	12.7
name of self	3	5.6	2	5.3	16	4.6
name of other	18	33.3	12	31.6	115	33.3

Table 2

Means of Several Measures of the Narrative Construction of Self

Construction of Self and Other	Mean Occurrence in Violence Stories	Mean Occurrence in Non-violent Conflict Stories	Mean Occurrence in All Stories
singular self references	9.76	10.28	8.27
plural self references	1.55	1.50	2.44
kinship reference	2.25	2.39	2.00
references to own emotion or motive	1.18	1.83	1.33
references to another's emotions or motives	0.49	0.78	.33
use of psychological vocabulary (emotion, motive, trait attributions)	2.10	3.19	1.93
references to self in relational terms (roles, relationships, group membership)	4.45	4.67	5.03
references to self as individuated (name, achievements, traits, possessions, preferences)	11.61	12.78	10.83

Example 3: Punishment Violence

Story 163 4th grade

1. When I was three years old I first went to dacare.
2. The first thing I did was play with toys.
3. The next day I met the assestant teacher.
4. She was mean
5. and I can prove it.
6. She hit us with a belt when we came in from outside.
7. But I'm glad that I faked crying.
8. I couldn't wate for my guaguwation.

Example 4: Gun Possession by Child

Story 79 3rd grade

1. One day we went to my cousin's house in Dallas to visit my mother.
2. The adults were talking,
3. and I was watching cartoons.
4. I was three or four.
5. I really can't remember.
6. I was doing my regular habits like cartwheels and sucking my thumb.
7. While my parents were talking I started to get bored.
8. So while they weren't looking I went in my cousin's bedroom and jumped on her bed which I do at home.
9. Then I realized that it was a water bed.
10. When I stopped to get off and push down on it I looked on the dresser for some kind of tool to cut the bed open and swim inside it,
11. but instead of a tool I found a gun.
12. Actually I had never seen a gun that in my life.
13. Well I had never seen a gun.
14. So I picked it up by the handle and walked in the living room where my family members were still talking.
15. When I said bang, bang, my mother dropped to the floor like she was shot by some gangsters.
16. My father grabbing the phone and asking Rea my cousin the phone number for 911.
17. I was like a maniac.
18. Rea started inching my way and dodging from where I was pointing the gun while my father was comforting my mother on the floor.
19. When she finally got the from my hands she started saying what she was going to do when Buster her brother got back from Little Rock.
20. When we left that afternoon we were riding in our car.
21. I had nightmare about what would have happened if that gun was loaded and off the safety.

Example 5: Criminal Violence Against Child

Story 13 5th grade

1. One day me and my friends were skating.
2. Then a man in a gray car pulled up.
3. He told us to come to the car door
4. and he said that if we get in the car he will let us have it.
5. So my friend named Tony came to the car and started talking to him.
6. I told him get away from the car
7. and I pulled him away
8. and I told him that that man will try and kidnap him.
9. And the man got out the car and told me to come hear
10. and we started running.
11. I was so scared that we felt him behind
12. and that was not the first time we saw him
13. and my friend named Thomb hast told me about that man
14. and I did not believe him.
15. But now I do.
16. And my mom dosen't let me go far away from the house until that man gets caught.
17. I knew his license plate number
18. but I forgot it.
19. I will be very happy when they catch him.

Example 6: Fantasy Violence

Story 205 4th grade

1. One day a man came and said hey you there.
2. i said hey you there.
3. he said you got some money.
4. i said no why
5. and if i had some oney you wouldn't going to get it.
6. So he said i would kill you if you don't go in you house and tell your mother to give you some money so you can give it to me.
7. I said i ante going to do no thing for you because you is a strancher.
8. then i ran away
9. then a nother man saw me and was chasing me
10. and i ran and ran and ran.
11. he couldn't catch me because i had my favorite shoes on
12. and way i get them on i can run fast and fast and fast
13. i said to my self i would wear these every day.
14. and then he shot his own self
15. and he fell down.
16. then my cousins came
17. that's a girl and a boy
18. they help me
19. the boy jump on his back
20. and the girl got his gun and told the boy to get off his back
21. and the girl shot him in the arm

22. and he was running
23. and he just shot him in the head
24. and our family was saved.
the end.

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Figure 2

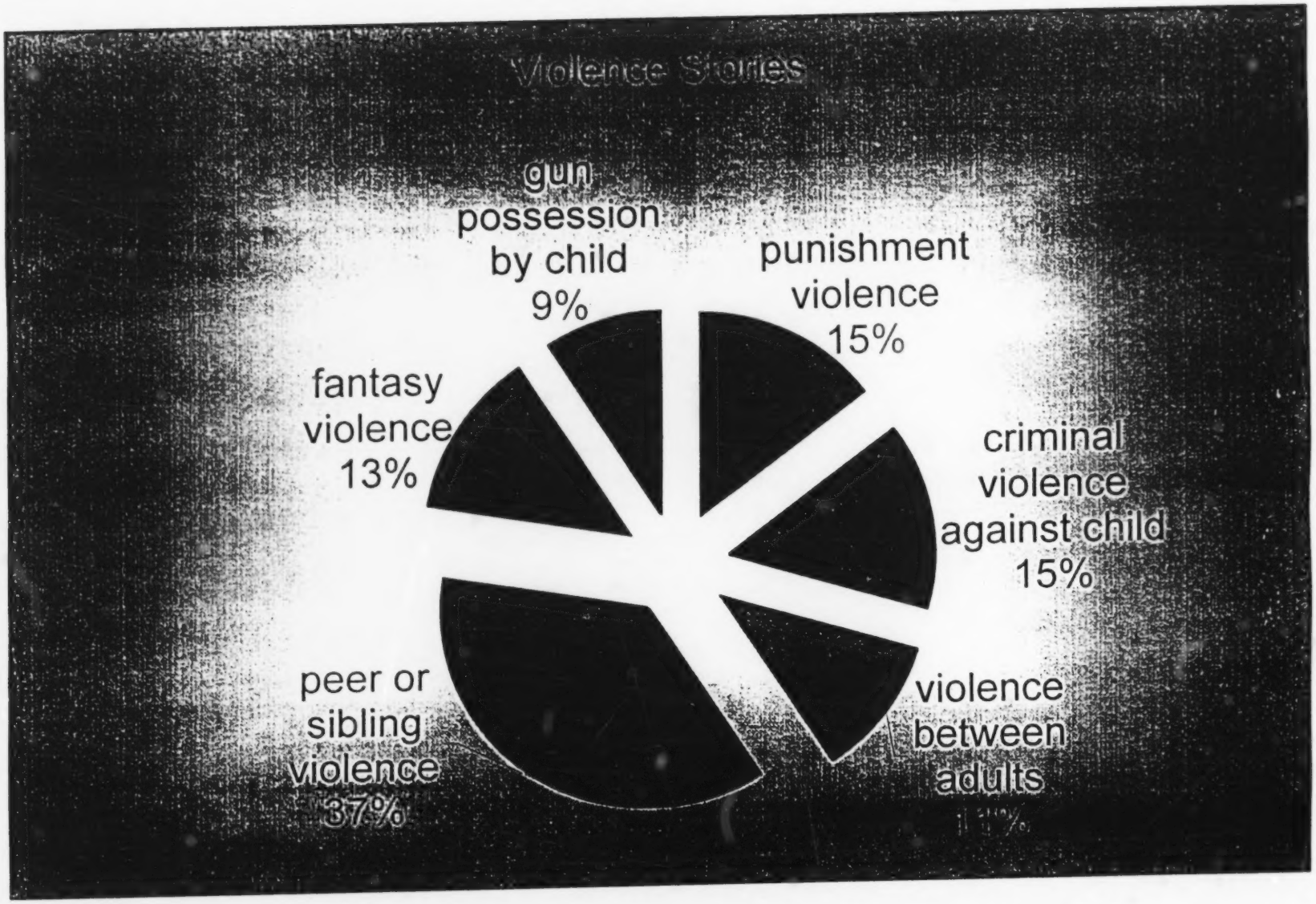

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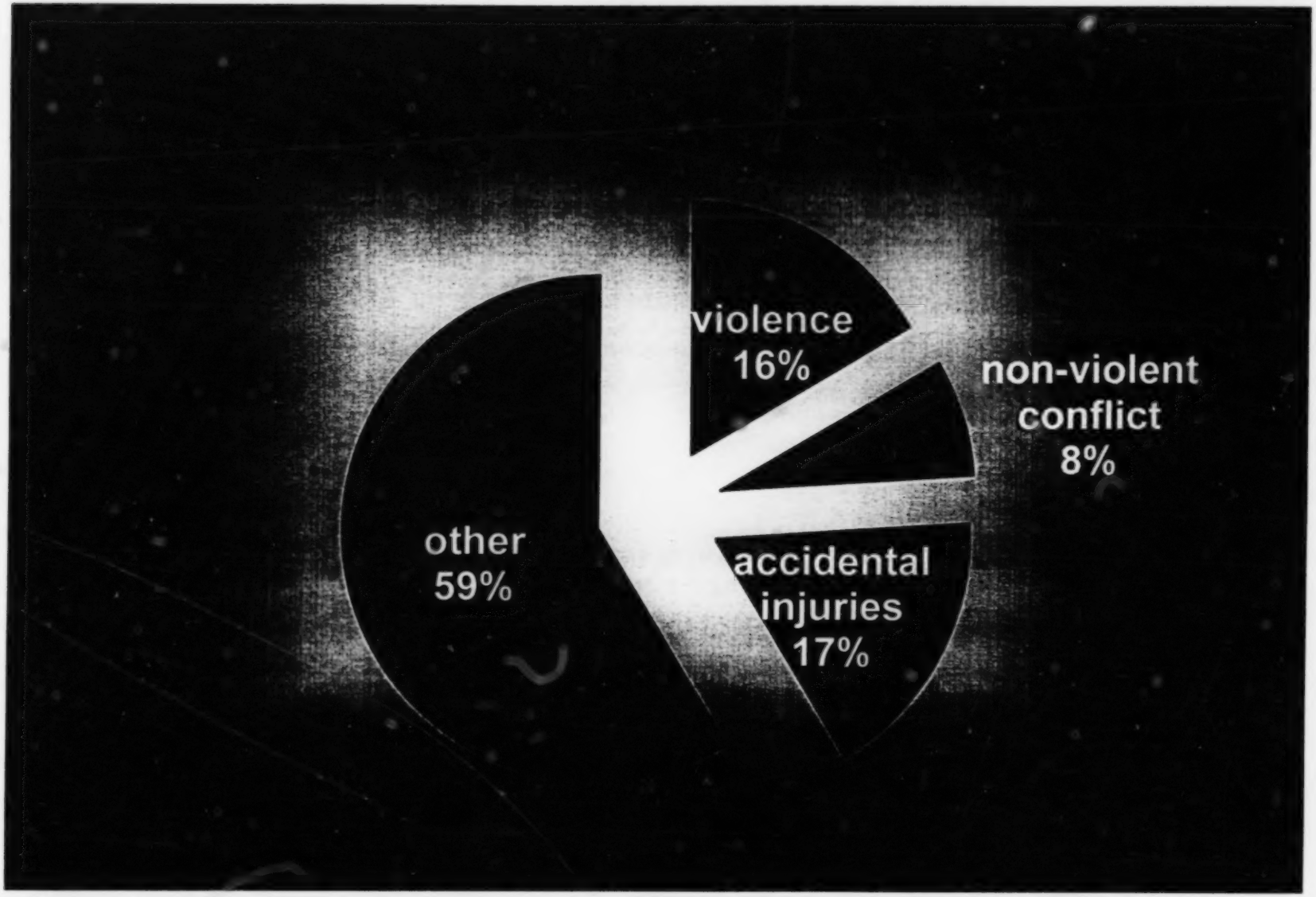
Figure 1



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